

Proposed UC-Merced medical school aims to boost ranks of rural doctors

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State Lt. Governor John Garamendi is proposing an ambitious fast-track medical school at University of California-Merced in an effort to create more doctors for the San Joaquin Valley, one of the most physician-poor regions in the state.

In a combined college/MD program, entering freshmen could shave up to three years off the time it takes to become a doctor. The cost would be only slightly higher than that of attending a traditional UC, said Garamendi.

"A new school has an opportunity to play a profoundly important role in meeting the health care needs of the San Joaquin Valley, and can be done in a way that is not expensive," said Garamendi. He will unveil his plan at a Thursday evening news conference in Fresno.

Entering freshmen — recruited from San Joaquin Valley high schools, with family ties to the region — would study at UC-Merced and local community colleges, then train in existing medical centers and clinics, instead of at a pricey research-oriented hospital.

They would be encouraged to train as primary care physicians and learn the challenges of practicing medicine in this vast region, where 130 languages are spoken and many residents suffer from chronic ailments such as diabetes, heart disease and respiratory ailments from dust, diesel-burning farm equipment and wood-burning stoves.

Because his plan would use existing facilities, it could be started in a hurry, he said. He aims to see the first freshman class start in fall 2010.

The UC Regents have long considered establishing a conventional medical school at the campus, but a steep price tag, combined with the state's financial problems, have derailed progress.

"It's time to go back and re-frame the project, so it gets done," said Garamendi, a Californian of Spanish descent who was born in the tiny Central Valley town of Mokelumne Hill, near Arnold, and now runs a cattle ranch in the Sierra Nevadas.

Although international and metropolitan-area California students would not be prohibited from applying to the program, students from the San Joaquin Valley would be aggressively recruited and earn extra consideration from the school's admissions office, he said.

UC-Merced, the state's youngest UC, is an isolated campus of only 2,700 students. Its first full undergraduate class will graduate this spring.

Students from the Central Valley "are every bit as capable as kids from anywhere else in the state, although they may not have the best schools," said Garamendi, who was educated in a rural, three-room school before attending UC-Berkeley, then Harvard.

The state's five existing UC medical schools are in the state's major population areas: San Francisco, Los Angeles, Sacramento, Orange County and San Diego.

The eight-county San Joaquin Valley has only 173 physicians per 100,000 people, compared with 415 per 100,000 residents in the greater Bay Area, according to a 2006 report from the Central Valley Health Policy Institute at California State University, Fresno.

It has 31 percent fewer primary care doctors and 51 percent fewer specialists than California as a whole. The region loses an estimated \$845 million annually when Central Valley patients drive out of the area to get medical care, according to Garamendi.

The proposed program would run year round, with no summer vacations. The lower-division course work would be completed in three years. The upper-division course work, which divides students between nursing and physician tracks, would entail two years of a general medical "rotation" education, following by three to eight years of specialty training.

Similar programs in states such as Ohio and New Mexico have helped shore up the ranks of rural doctors.

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